

## Suppavāsā Sutta

### The Discourse on Suppa,vāsā

[Four blessings from giving food]  
(Aṅguttara Nikāya 4.57/2:62 f)  
Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2008

#### 1 Significance of giving

**1.1 THE FOUR BLESSINGS.** The Suppavāsā Sutta says that right giving brings us four blessings: long life (*āyu*), beauty (*vaṇṇa*), happiness and comfort (*sukha*), and health and strength (*bala*), which is reminiscent of the famous **Dhammapada** verse:

<p><i>Abhivādana, sīlissa niccam vuddhāpacāyino cattāro dhammā vaḍḍhanti āyu vaṇṇo sukham balaṃ</i></p>	<p>For one who habitually shows respect, constantly respectful of elders,<sup>1</sup> four states increase: age, beauty, happiness and strength. (Dh 109)<sup>2</sup></p>
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I have not been able to locate any other canonical reference for these four blessings. My guess is that they are related to the first four of the five precepts.<sup>3</sup>

<u>Precept</u>	<u>Benefit: increases</u>
(1) keeping to the precept against destroying life	age (long life) ( <i>āyu</i> );
(2) keeping to the precept against taking the not given	happiness and health ( <i>sukha</i> );
(3) keeping to the precept against sexual misconduct	beauty and grace ( <i>vaṇṇa</i> );
(4) keeping to the precept against falsehood	strength or power ( <i>bala</i> ).
[5] keeping to the precept against intoxication	wisdom [ <i>paññā</i> ].

As already explained elsewhere,<sup>4</sup> the precepts are training rules (*sikkhā, pada*) for basic moral virtue, but they are basically the morality of omission (that is, we train ourselves *not* to break these training rules). Each of these precepts have their respective cultivation practice, that is, the morality of commission, that is,<sup>5</sup>

<u>Basic precept training</u>	<u>Morality of commission</u>
(1) having kept the precept against destroying life	we practise lovingkindness;
(2) having kept the precept against taking the not given	we practise generosity;
(3) having kept the precept against sexual misconduct	we practise contentment; and
(4) having kept the precept against falsehood	we practise beneficial truthfulness.
[5] having kept the precept against intoxication	we practise wisdom.

The dynamics of moral conduct and their karmic fruit work as follows.

**Āyu.** When we protect and nurture life with lovingkindness, we create the conditions for a healthy and happy life, which is likely to be a long one.

<sup>1</sup> Cf **Kimsīla S** (Sn 325). “Elders” (Be Se *vuddha*; Ce Ee *vaḍḍha*)

<sup>2</sup> **Prākṛt Dh:** *adhivādana, sīlisa | nica vṛḍha, vasayino | catvari tasa vardhati | ayo kirti subha bala.* (Dh:P [Cvo. 34]). **Gāndhārī Dh:** *ahivādana, sīlisa | nica vṛidha, vayarino | catvari tasa vardhadi | ayo kirta suha bala ||* (Dh:G 172 [11.11] Suha). *Manusmṛti* (a post-Buddha brahminical work): *Abhivādana, sīlasya | nityam vṛddhōpasevina | catvāri sampravardhante | āyur vidyā yaśo balaṃ* (*Manusmṛti*. 2.121).

<sup>3</sup> On the first 4 precepts, see **Sigāl’ovāda S** (D 31.3b/3:181) = SD 4.1.

<sup>4</sup> **Virtue ethics** = SD 18.11(6.3).

<sup>5</sup> On the first 4 precepts, see eg **Tad-ah’uposatha S** (A 3.70.9-12/1:211 f) = SD 4.18.

**Sukha.** When we do not steal (that is, not take what is not rightfully ours or what support others in their living and comfort), but practise generosity, we help others and ourselves to be happy. We will also feel comfortable and look beautiful.

**Vaṇṇa.** When we respect our body and that of another, and experience contentment (that is, we rise above lust and hate), we will be healthy and look beautiful.

**Bala.** When we avoid falsehood, but practise mutually beneficial truthfulness, we are more likely to form lasting and good friendships, even spiritual friendship, in which will lie our true strength.

Thus, we can see the close connections between the four blessings and the practise of the first four precepts.

## 1.2 THE VERSES.

**1.2.1 The first stanza.** The Suppavāsā Sutta closes with two stanzas, the first a sestet and the second a quatrain. Apparently, the first stanza (the octet as a whole) appears only in this Sutta, but the last line—*maha-p, phalā lokavidūna vaṇṇitā* [§3f]—is found in **the Daddalla Vimāna, vatthu** (Vv 3.6.26/32), and is quoted in **the Kathā, vatthu** (Kvu 554), where it is said to be spoken by Shakra. However, I am unable to locate any such stanza in the Pali or the Commentaries, and it is likely to have come from a lost text.<sup>6</sup>

The first stanza centres around “merit” (*puñña*), the rage of the popular religion of the Buddha’s time, and in later brahmanized Buddhism (that is, the popular forms of Buddhism today). Any religion that is to grow has to address this dense crowd of faith-inclined believers who are bent on immediate and mundane blessings, and future comforts and heavenly bliss, rather than nirvana.

More importantly, it is from this crowd that potential converts and saints emerge to walk the path to awakening. Understandably, the Buddha often gives teachings on merit (*puñña*), sometimes simply as a proverbial carrot to attract worldlings to live a morally upright life, but more often as a sugar-coat to teachings that bring us beyond worldliness (as found in the second stanza).

The first two lines—“**Who gives food well prepared, | that is clean, imbued with exquisite tastes**” [§3ab]—basically means “give good food,” and sounds rather mundane, but it should be remembered that such offerings are not made to monastics alone. They are consumed by the congregation, too. Indeed, such alms-offerings invariably attract a good crowd that is both motivated by the merit they accumulate through giving, and the communal meal they enjoy in an auspicious and festive ambience.

The second pair of lines—“**having given these gifts to those straight in conduct, | endowed with proper conduct, gone to greatness**” [§3cd]—define the best recipients of alms-offering. “Straight in conduct” (*ujju, gata*) is the same as “(who) keeps to the straight way” (*uju, patipanna*) which should be taken as a synecdoche for the reflection on the holy community’s virtue.<sup>7</sup> I take this to refer basically to those well-intentioned unawakened (*kalyāṇa, puthujjana*) monastics who are “working to overcome greed, hate and delusion.”<sup>8</sup> Clearly, “giving made to the morally virtuous is of great fruit, and not so of those made to the immoral.”<sup>9</sup>

Then, “**(those) endowed with proper conduct**” [§3d] would refer to the saints who are learners of the path (*sekha*), who are even more giftworthy than the morally virtuous worldling monastics. And most giftworthy of all would be those “**gone to greatness**” [§3d], that is, the arhats.

The last two lines—“**they accumulate merit upon merit, | and the great fruit praised by the World-knower**”—refers to the immediate and mundane benefits, and it is an act endorsed by the Buddha himself. These are clearly teachings for the faith-inclined.

**1.2.2 The second stanza.** The second stanza [§4] (the quatrain)—which is a recollection on giving (*cāgānussati*)<sup>10</sup>—appears to be more popular, and is found (with minor variations) in **the Daddalla Vimāna, vatthu** (Vv 3.6.27/32), **the Vihāra Vimāna, vatthu** (Vv 4.6.26/41), and **the Kathā, vatthu** (Kvu 554), where (as already mentioned) it is said to be spoken by Shakra. “**Recalling such sacrifices as these,**

<sup>6</sup> It would be interesting to look out all the citations of this line in the Chinese Āgamas and related works.

<sup>7</sup> See **Aṭṭha, puggala S 1** (A 8.59/4:292) = SD 15.10a.

<sup>8</sup> See **(Sumana) Dāna S** (A 6.37/3:336 f) = SD 22.1.

<sup>9</sup> See **(Dāna) Vaccha, gotta S** (A 3.57.4a/1:161) = SD 22.12.

<sup>10</sup> See **Cāgānussati** = SD 15.12.

| **they wander the world, inspired with joy**” [§4ab] refers to the donors who recollect joy of their giving, which acts as a basis for meditation can “inspire them with joy” (*veda,jāta*).

The term *veda,jātā*<sup>11</sup> means “blissful, thrilled, filled with enthusiasm, overcome with awe,” arising from spiritual experience or experience. The Commentaries invariably gloss *veda,jāta* as “filled with bliss” or “blissful”: *tutṭhi,jātā* (AA 3:97), *sañjāta,somanassā* (BA 85), *jāta,somanassā* (VvA 156). The Saṃyutta Commentary explains it as *hāsa,bahulo, pāmojja,bahulo*, “much laughter, much gladness” (SA 1:120).<sup>12</sup> Here, *veda*, means “inspired knowledge” and is no ordinary or worldly knowledge, but one arising as a result of meditation and mindfulness, that is to say, “the wisdom of cultivation” (*bhāvanā,mayā paññā*).<sup>13</sup>

The last two lines —“**having pushed away the stingy stain by the root, | blameless, they win a place in heaven**” [§4cd]—refer to the karmic benefit and the happy rebirth of right giving. The true giver overcomes both greed and hate, and on dying are pushed on by the wholesome karmic momentum to be reborn in a happy place.

In fact, if the giver is skillful enough, the recollection on giving can be expedient in bringing about dhyana, or at least their inner stillness. With the reflection on impermanence (*anicca,saññā*),<sup>14</sup> the practitioner then progresses to streamwinning and beyond. Thus, stanza 4 as whole can be taken to refer to the destiny of a streamwinner: he is full of faith, naturally blissful, and is reborn in a “heavenly place” (whether on earth or in heaven). In other words, here we have the spiritual instruction concerning giving, that is, on how it can bring us *more than* merit, in fact, to go beyond merit and demerit.

## 2 Suppavāsā

Suppavāsā, or more fully, Suppavāsā Koliya,dhītā (the Koliya lady) is the mother of the famous arhat **Sīvalī**. Before he was born, Suppavāsā goes through seven days of labour in great pain. It was not until the Buddha blesses her that she is able to deliver her child. It is said that Sīvalī remains seven years in her womb, and the reason for this is given in **the Khadira,vaniya Revata Vatthu** (DhA 7.9) and **the Asāta,rūpa Jātaka** (J 100).

Once when the Bodhisattva was the king of Benares, the Kosala king waged war on him, slew him and took his queen as his own wife. The dead king’s son escaped through a sewer and returned with a large army to give battle. His mother, learning of this, suggests that he blockade the city instead. So he blockades the city, and so successful is he that on the seventh day, the people cut off the king’s head and brought it to the prince.

<sup>11</sup> A 2:63 = *tutṭhi,jātā*, “full of bliss,” AA 3:96; Sn 995, 1023; B 2.39/8 = *sañjāta,somanassā*, “full of joy,” BA 85; Kvu 554 = Vv 34,27 = *jāta,somanassā*, “full of joy,” VvA 156; J 1:11; Miln 297. See Vism 7.119 (tr) at SD 15.13.4 (**Devatānussati**). *Veda,jāta* is connected with *attha,veda* and *dhamma,veda*: see (**Agata,phala**) **Mahānāma S** (A 6.10/3:284-288) = SD 15.3 Intro (4).

<sup>12</sup> Cf the smile-producing consciousness or “mirth-producing consciousness” (*hasit’uppāda,citta*), mentioned in **Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha**, referring to a kind of functional consciousness independent of karma, found only in arhats (Abhs:BRS 1.10, 2.28, 3.17, 18, 21, 4.27; Abhs:SR 86 n1, 162; Abhs:WG 25, 85, 86, 91, 105, 109, 113, 115, 116, 117, 156, 239, 240, 306).

<sup>13</sup> **The 3 kinds of wisdom** (*paññā*) are: (1) the wisdom of reflection (*cintā,mayā paññā*) or philosophical knowledge; (2) the wisdom of hearing (*suta,mayā paññā*, lit “wisdom heard”), or academic knowledge; and (3) the wisdom of cultivation (*bhāvanā,mayā paññā*), or spiritual insight (D 3:219; Vbh 324). Apparently they are not mentioned anywhere else in the Canon, and the Comys list *suta,mayā paññā* first. The set however is found in Buddhist Skt works, eg Abdhk 334. **Vibhaṅga** defs **the wisdom of reflection** as receptivity [openness] to knowledge not gained through hearing from another (*khantim...parato assutvā paṭilabhati*); **the wisdom of hearing** as receptivity to knowledge gained by hearing from another (*khantim...parato sutvā paṭilabhati*); and **the wisdom of cultivation** as all the wisdom of one who has spiritual attainment (*sabbā pi samāpannassa paññā*) (Vbh 325 = DA 3:1002; VbhA 410-412 = DAT 3:272-274). See Gethin 2001:222 f. On *khanti* as “receptivity,” see BHS: *ksānti*.

<sup>14</sup> See eg (**Anicca**) **Cakkhu S** (S 25.1/3:225) = SD 16.7.

It was this prince who is reborn as Sīvalī in our Buddha's time. The blockade is the reason for his remaining seven years in his mother's womb, and for her taking seven days in delivering him. The story was related by the Buddha to explain to the monks the reason for Suppavāsā's long pregnancy.<sup>15</sup>

Suppavāsā is the daughter of the rajah of Koliya (J 1:407). The Aṅguttara Commentary says that "when she came of age, she moved to the house of a Sakya prince" (*sā vaya-p.pattā ekassa sakya,kumār-assa gehāṃ gatā*).<sup>16</sup> The Apadāna says that she is married the Licchavi **Mahāli**,<sup>17</sup> The teachings of **the Suppavāsā Sutta** (A 4.57) are given when she is living in the Koliya village of Sajjana.

She is declared by the Buddha as the foremost among the women disciples who gave choice alms (*aggam panīta,dāyikānam*, A 1:26), an eminence which she resolved to attain in the time of Padumuttara Buddha (AA 1:452 f). She is mentioned with Anāthapiṇḍika, Culla Anāthapiṇḍika and Visākhā, as givers of alms-offering which are gladly accepted by the monks (DhA 1:339). In this context, she is spoken of as living in Sāvattthi, which is probably after Mahāli goes to live there.<sup>18</sup> She is amongst the prominent awakened women disciples (*bojjhā upasikā*, AA 4:160).

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<sup>15</sup> J 100/1:407-410 & DhA 7.9c/2:197-200; the stories vary slightly in details..

<sup>16</sup> AA 1:453.

<sup>17</sup> Ap 540.28/2:494.

<sup>18</sup> Cf DhA 4:193 f.

## The Discourse on Suppavāsā

(A 4.57/2:62 f)

### Suppavāsā makes a right giving

**1a** At one time, the Blessed One was staying amongst the Koliyas at a market town of the Koliyas named Sajjana.

Then, when it was morning, the Blessed One dressed and, taking bowl and robe, went up to the house of the Koliya lady Suppavāsā for alms. Having gone to the house he sat down on the prepared seat.

Then the Koliya girl Suppavāsā served the Blessed One with her own hands with excellent hard and soft foods, and waited on him.

### The four blessings of right giving

**1b** Then [63] when the Blessed One had finished his meal and withdrawn his hand from his bowl, the Koliya lady Suppavāsā sat down at one side.

Seated thus at one side, the Blessed One said this to the Koliya lady Suppavāsā:

**2** “Suppavāsā, noble woman disciples, in giving, are the receivers of four things.

What are the four?

(1) She gives life (āyu).

(2) She gives beauty (vaṇṇa).

(3) She gives happiness [comfort] (sukha).

(4) She gives strength (bāla).

Having given life, there is long life, divine or human, for her.<sup>19</sup>

Having given beauty, there is beauty, divine or human, for her.

Having given happiness, there is happiness, divine or human, for her.

Having given strength, there is strength, divine or human, for her.

Suppavāsā, noble woman disciples, in giving, are the receivers of these four things.”

### The benefits of right giving<sup>20</sup>

**3** *Susaṅkhataṃ bhojanaṃ yā dadāti |*  
*suciṃ paṇītaṃ rāsasā upetaṃ ||*  
*sā dakkhiṇā ujju,gatesu dinnā |*  
*caraṇōpapannesu maha-g,gatesu, ||*  
*puññaena puññaṃ saṃsandamānā |*  
*maha-p,phalā lokavidūna vaṇṇitā. ||*  
Who gives food well prepared,  
that is clean, imbued with exquisite tastes,  
having given these gifts to those straight in conduct,  
endowed with proper conduct, gone to greatness,  
they accumulate merit upon merit,  
and the great fruit praised by the World-knower.

**4** *Etādisaṃ yaññaṃ anussarantā |*  
*ye veda,jātā vicaranti loke ||*  
*vineyya macchera,malaṃ sa,mūlaṃ |*  
*aninditā saggam upenti thānan ti. ||*  
Recalling such sacrifices as these,  
they wander the world, blissful [inspired by joy],  
having pushed away the stingy stain by the root,  
blameless, they win a place in heaven.

— evaṃ —

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<sup>19</sup> *Āyūṃ kho pana datvā āyussa bhāginī hoti dibbassa vā mānusassa vā.*

<sup>20</sup> On these two stanzas, see Intro (1.2).